



**University of  
Zurich**<sup>UZH</sup>

**Zurich Open Repository and  
Archive**

University of Zurich  
University Library  
Strickhofstrasse 39  
CH-8057 Zurich  
[www.zora.uzh.ch](http://www.zora.uzh.ch)

---

Year: 2014

---

## **Conceptualising "Contested Development" – from grand narratives to the nitty-gritty of the everyday**

Geiser, Urs

Posted at the Zurich Open Repository and Archive, University of Zurich

ZORA URL: <https://doi.org/10.5167/uzh-100591>

Book Section

Published Version

Originally published at:

Geiser, Urs (2014). Conceptualising "Contested Development" – from grand narratives to the nitty-gritty of the everyday. In: Sharma, Sagar Raj; Upreti, Bishnu Raj; Manandhar, Prabir; Sapkota, Mahendra. Contested Development in Nepal: Experiences and Reflections. Kathmandu: School of Arts, Kathmandu University and Nepal Centre for Contemporary Research, 1-25.

# Conceptualising 'Contested Development' – from Grand Narratives to the Nitty-gritty of the Everyday

*Urs Geiser*

## 1.1 Introduction

"Political instability clouded the outlook in FY13 and remains the principal source of vulnerability going forward. The delayed adoption of a full budget in FY13 depressed public spending and negatively affected investor sentiment, while agriculture sector activity suffered from a weak monsoon. Overall, economic growth is estimated to have dipped to a relatively anemic 3.6 percent, with average inflation just under the double-digit mark" (World Bank 2013a, p. 2).

"Policy makers, politicians, and development agencies use poverty alleviation as a manipulation to resist alternative political formation as a form of popular uprising and create hurdles to structural changes in the governance system" (Bhurtel as cited in Manandhar 2011, p.43)

The notion of 'development' has become an important part and parcel of economic planning, political debate and often everyday language – but the meanings it carries and refers to are multiple and diverse – and at times even contradictory. This holds true for Nepal as well as for many other countries of South Asia (and beyond). In Nepal, though, competing understandings of 'development', and especially of what 'development' is not meant to be, have triggered even a violent conflict over the last decades. This violence brought suffering to millions of people, and though the war officially ended in late 2006, it still influences the social and political life of the country to this very day. Development is not just an abstract notion, therefore, used by researchers, experts or bureaucrats, but something contrary to that, something that

affects the livelihoods and lifeworlds of most people, happening at times in subtle and almost unrecognised ways, but often in very direct and even violent ways.

So, then, what is this 'development'? At first sight, it refers to something we take for granted, something nobody can disagree with. We all see poor people, living in misery, even hungry ones, on TV and in newspapers. 'Development' is about helping them, bringing them out of poverty, 'doing-good' enabling them a decent life. And there are experts who know how to do it. Perhaps, we are such experts ourselves, or at least we can support those who are. Next, we come across voices that question the way these experts go about to help the poor. At times we see this in the form of a 'Letter to the Editor' or in the shape of a critical action group; we can find it in specific research streams (e.g. Cooke and Kothari 2001) or see it on the streets in the form of protests – and (as in the case of Nepal), experience it in outright war. Indeed, development can be an arena of contestation.

This, of course, is a very general introduction – though it may not be shared by many who are actively and morally involved in the development enterprise (trying to do their best), or by those who perceive 'development' as a separate sphere or niche of some experts, or NGOs. This rather general introduction is to indicate that the present article goes beyond a narrow understanding of 'development'. The lines to follow will argue that 'development' has become a reality that influences most, if not all, aspects of social, economic, political and cultural life, especially in countries of the Global South. It also argues that there are competing claims regarding which kind of 'development' is the right one, and which one is wrong. Such contestations can go beyond mere talking and discursive argumentations among 'experts' or researchers; they can become real and tangible.

In order to underpin this argument, the paper starts in section 1.2 with a recall of the main or 'grand development discourses', i.e. the mainstream-residual, the relational-radical, and the post-development discourses. It is the respective framing of the

meanings of development within these discourses that prepare the terrain of contestations. This background allows in section 1.3 to trace overlaps and similarities, but specifically to identify fault lines – fault lines between the dominant development discourses that have the potential to trigger contestations. Section 1.4 zooms into three of these (potential) contestations, i.e. the respective role assigned to the state, the role ascribed to local social mobilisation, and what is meant by talking of 'the poor' in the different discourses.

The key argument emerging out of this closer look at issues across dominant development discourses is two-fold. On the one hand, some contestations indeed follow the structures pre-set by the 'grand' discourses. There are instances where contested visions of societal progress do not only clash in the sphere of rhetorics, but quite concretely, on the ground (and Nepal's recent history is an evidence of this). However, when drawing our attention closer to the actual practices and the everyday struggle within the three issues we zoomed in, we find an array of challenges that go beyond and even across the seemingly contested nature of the grand discourses. Whether 'the state' follows a more radical or a mainstream development discourse is one thing; but whether this state can be made accountable, effective and representative for a diversity of social groups is quite another, and this is a challenge to be faced equally by advocates for a 'liberal', a 'radical' or a 'post-developmental' state – to mention just one of the examples to be discussed in section 1.4.

Section 1.5 attempts to bring these thoughts together by arguing that 'development' continues to be a contested terrain, and that these contestations shift (at least to some extent) from the more ideological level of 'grand narratives' to the more practical and everyday level. In this pragmatic field of 'the everyday', many of the contradictions between grand narratives tend to fade away.

The present paper emphasises conceptual issues, with attempts to stimulate critical discussion. Keeping this in focus, it makes few direct references to the specificities of Nepal – though many of the points may implicitly suggest links to ongoing discussions in Nepal.

It is the task of the subsequent chapters in this edited volume on 'contested development' to either make these links explicit, or to contest my arguments.

## **1.2 'Development' discourses**

Taking a critical look at the notion of 'development' forecloses a quick and unreflected use of its core terminology (such as poverty, growth, participation, empowerment, progress) – as all these reflect specific meanings. And to complicate matters further, words such as 'empowerment' can mean many different things. As we show further below, many development-related words have meanings that are linked to specific theoretical and political/normative understandings of society, its internal dynamics, and imaginations of paths for change. This brings us to the importance of 'discourses' in a Foucauldian sense; according to this understanding, discourses "(...) systematically organize knowledge and experience, and repress alternatives through their dominance" (Outhwaite and Bottomore 1993). This definition emphasises that discourses are not just composed of words, but that these words can become potentially powerful through their normative and strategic usage in social interactions. This helps us to be sensitive to the conceptual and normative underpinnings of development-related 'words'; and with this, to identify potential contestations between (differently framed) discourses.

Discourses though, are many and the present discussion demands a rough grouping. At the risk of simplification, I differentiate three main ones, which can be labelled as 'mainstream/residual', 'radical/relational', and 'post-developmental' (for an excellent review of Nepal-related literature along similar lines, see Ghimire 2009). In the following, key elements of each of these development discourses are delineated.

The mainstream/residual perspective refers to a "residual" understanding of poverty and change:

"The residual approach views poverty as a consequence of being 'left out' of processes of development, on the assumption that

development brings economic growth which, sooner or later, raises everybody's income. This is termed the 'trickle down' effect: that the benefits of growth trickle down even to the poorest groups in society in the form of increased opportunities to earn (more) income. The implication for development policy is to target the rural poor in order to integrate them into processes of development they have been excluded from. In practice, this typically means integrating them more deeply into markets and devoting more of their resources and energies to producing goods for sale (...)" (Bernstein 1992).

This approach has a long history, and became mainstream in the early 1970s with the emerging rural development concepts of the World Bank. Realising the failure of previous growth-oriented import substitution strategies that focused on the scale of the national economy, questions of growth, (re-)distribution and equity were raised. The then World Bank president McNamara called "to reorient development policies in order to provide a more equitable distribution of the benefits of economic growth" by means of a precise targeting of development planning on those groups that actually experience poverty. With this, poverty became closely associated with the notion of 'small farmers'. They were seen as those most suffering, because land was concentrated in the hands of a few, tenancy arrangements were insecure (McNamara 1973, p. 247), but "more frequently they suffer because they have little access to technology and services, and because the institutions which would sustain a higher level of productivity are lacking" (World Bank 1975, p. 21). They are poor because they are stuck in "traditional low-yielding subsistence production" (p. 23), as also in cultural backwardness:

"(...) rural areas are notable for high levels of morbidity and mortality, especially infant mortality; physical and mental lethargy and inability to sustain hard work on a regular basis; limited ability to recognize or to respond to problems and challenges; lack of awareness; inactive and poor motivation towards improvement and learning; and, often, hostility toward outside sources of change (...)" (World Bank 1975, p. 25).

Though these assessments were made forty years ago, they still dominate mainstream development thinking – I call it mainstream because important development actors continue to share this discourse (e.g. most national planning commissions, finance departments, bilateral and international donors). Just for illustration, IFPRI writes in 2013:

“For smallholder farmers with profit potential, their ability to be successful is hampered by such challenges as climate change, price shocks, limited financing options, and inadequate access to healthy and nutritious food. By overcoming these challenges, smallholders can move from subsistence to commercially oriented agricultural systems, increase their profits, and operate at an efficient scale (...)” (IFPRI 2013, p. vi).

This framing of the causes of underdevelopment informs the path of change to be taken. Here, too, it is helpful to revisit the 1970s, which indicates that such discussions are not the privilege of the present. The World Bank's analysis of (rural) poverty as caused by people being stuck in traditional subsistence structures was translated into the need for a development strategy based on "(...) advancing structural transformation (...), raising the welfare of the farm population, and fostering changes in rural attitudes and behaviour that will have beneficial effects on the process of modernization" (Johnston and Kilby 1975, p. 51). "Structural transformation" refers to the gradual integration of small farmers into circuits of market-oriented production (the contemporary hype with 'value-chains' neatly fits into this discourse). By providing adequate inputs like better seeds, irrigation and training, farmers are invited to produce food and raw materials beyond their subsistence needs. This surplus is expected on the one hand to contribute to the growth of the non-farm sector (forward linkages). On the other hand, small farmers now earn some income with which to purchase goods from the emerging market (backward linkages). The third objective of changing attitudes from subsistence producers to entrepreneurial farmers refers to the need for a "more widespread familiarity with calculations of costs and returns and with the evaluation and selective adoption of innovations" (Johnston and Kilby 1975, p. 55).

Though written forty years ago, this discourse continues to inform the contemporary mainstream, as the concept of “shared prosperity” launched by the World Bank in early 2013 illustrates:

"(Poverty alleviation) requires sustaining high rates of economic growth across the developing world, as well as translating growth more effectively into poverty reduction in each developing country" (World Bank 2013b, p. 11). And: “Shared prosperity, understood in this way, is not an agenda of redistributing an economic pie of a fixed size. Rather, it means expanding the size of the pie continuously and sharing it in such a way that the welfare of those at the lower end of the income distribution rises as quickly as possible. It also requires that progress is sustainable over time and across generations, in terms of the environment, social inclusion, and fiscal prudence” (p. 21).

As the poor are (perceived as being) stuck in subsistence and exhibit a non-entrepreneurial behaviour, they are not in a position to enter this process of “evolutionary development” (Johnston and Kilby, 1975, p. 55) on their own (otherwise they would have ‘developed’ autonomously). To induce the required change became the task of external development agents, though the meaning of this term varied over time. The 1970s and early 1980s saw an enormous expansion of state departments and personnel, while the 1990's favoured more private initiatives including non-governmental organisations (NGOs). In parallel, international donor support grew rapidly. Still, the ratio between these “service providers” or “change agents” and the masses of poor people never matched (“local governments ... seldom reach down so far” (WB 2008, p. 256)), thus requiring the poor small farmers and communities to be mobilised– in order to improve their access to service delivery, and to give them some voice in defining the kind of services to be delivered:

“(...) collective action through producer organisations can facilitate economies of scale”. Besides local groups, NGOs are crucial: (...) the unique competencies of many nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) can be harnessed to deliver services,



especially at the local government and community levels” (World Bank 2008, p. 248).

Thus, far, I made a few hints at the residual/mainstream development discourse, its underpinnings, and its continued importance. What, then, is different in the discourse labelled as relational/radical? To quote Bernstein again:

“(...) relational approaches investigate the causes of rural poverty in terms of social relations of production and reproduction, of property and power, that characterize certain kinds of development, and especially those associated with the spread and growth of capitalism. A relational approach thus asks rather different questions: are some poor because others are rich (and vice versa)? What are the mechanisms that generate both wealth and poverty as two sides of the same coin of (capitalist) development?” (Bernstein 1992)

In a relational approach, poverty results not from the persistence of subsistence production, but the persistence of exploitative social relations: “(...) poverty endures because of the social relationships and structures within which particular social groups are embedded. (...) chronic poverty is a socio-political relationship rather than a condition of assetlessness” (Bebbington 2007, p. 793).

The question “are some poor *because* others are rich” is answered in the positive by referring to the persistence of unequal social relations. Here, the (economic) category of class is the central analytical device. Put simply – there exists (objectively) a ‘class’ (or classes) of people that are in a position to exercise power over another class (or classes) of people – to such an extent that the latter are prevented of benefitting from any economic progress. Poverty and inequality result from this class structure and its inherent mechanisms of exploitation. The rationale for this exploitative behaviour is considered inherent in, and foundational of, capitalism: “The purchaser of [a] commodity [e.g. labour power] must somehow realize more from its use than has been paid for it; this is the systemic imperative facing capital” (Herring and Agarwala 2006, p. 325).

The mechanisms of how exploitation works can take various forms, to which 'primitive accumulation' and 'surplus extraction' are central. In the case of primitive accumulation (or accumulation by dispossession), people are separated from, or hindered in accessing, resources they need for their livelihoods. Examples include land that has been used as common property, but which is fenced off coercively and violently and thus privatised by some. Surplus extraction/appropriation refers to the process whereby people do not receive the benefit from what they produce with their labour and work (e.g. low prices paid by traders for agricultural goods, or low salaries given by landowners to agricultural labourers). Through these mechanisms of exploitation, the influential classes continuously accumulate more resources which enables them to further their exploitative reach. Very often, the state is accused of facilitating such exploitation and accumulation through "extra-economic means" (Glassman 2006, p. 616), for example, by not implementing land reform laws, by supporting privatisation, or by enforcing laws that go against labour.

Thus, the notion of 'structural transformation', central to the mainstream/residual approaches – in the radical perspective – is seen not as a solution, but as the problem per se. The mainstream's focus on integrating subsistence-based small farmers into the market-led surplus production is read and interpreted through class eyes and an ontological suspiciousness against those who have more influence. Structural transformation is read as commodification whereby only asset-owning classes benefit. Structural transformation (which has accelerated through 'neo-liberalism') leads to marginalisation, forcing the poor even more into a wage labour.

As the root causes of poverty and inequality are seen to rest in exploitative social relations (and not in the lack of market-oriented production), it is these social relations that need to be changed. The radical position also calls for making 'structural transformation'. It means to transform exploitative social relations into non-exploitative forms of social relations – especially in regard to processes of production, exchange and the use of surplus. For radicals, markets are not the solution, but a problem. Market

relations are synonymous of exploitation, and they cannot be changed just by calling for more fairness in the existing market relations:

“(...) justice is not a question of reforming the hearts and minds of propertied people, but rather a question of reducing the dependency and destitution that subject those without property to abject subordination (...)” (Herring and Agarwal 2006, p. 325).

In order to ensure non-exploitative social relations, there is a need to “socially regulate” them (Ramakumar 2013). In the relational discourse, it is not the market, but the state that has to ensure non-exploitative social relations. But there is a dilemma: Exploitation results from the power of the influential classes and the support they receive from this very state. Thus, what is required is to transform the present (neo-liberal) state into a 'progressive' state through a "new radical imagination":

"The new politics is not an 'end of the state' but the affirmation of the state as an instrument of people's power, people's democracy and people's empowerment" (Tariq 2010).

The new state must be achieved through struggles – and this, in turn, requires the mobilisation and 'empowerment' of the exploited classes. Mobilisation means that the exploited first need to be made conscious of their class position (i.e. that they are exploited as many others like them are exploited, so that they have a shared 'class position' and related interests). They then need to be collectively organised to finally engage in a “class struggle”, or (in less orthodox terms), in “collective practices of actors for the realization of class interests against interests of other classes” (Herring and Agarwal 2006, p. 331).

Let us finally move to the third grand discourse, i.e. the post-developmental perspective, which has become quite popular among western intellectuals. Its core argument is given in Esteva's famous statement that you "must be either very dumb or very rich if you fail to notice that development stinks" (Esteva 1987, p.135). This statement first of all fundamentally criticises the notion of

development inherent in both discourses described so far, i.e. the mainstream/residual and the radical/relational perspectives. Arturo Escobar (1992, p. 20) explicitly criticises both, i.e. "Development" in the mainstream sense of "a matter of capital, technology, and education and the appropriate policy and planning mechanisms to successfully combine these elements (...)", and "Resistance" in the relational/radical sense – because it reduces development to "a class issue and a question of imperialism". In the perspective of post-development, underdevelopment (and with this a continuing poverty and inequality) is produced by these very discourses, each being a "master theory advocated by the West". Both, (neo)liberal and socialist approaches are accused of having impoverished the South. Both these narratives constructed the "Third World" and made it a playground for western ideas of (liberal or radical) modernisation. As stated by Parfitt (2012),

"Escobar explicitly uses discourse theory to argue that development should be viewed 'not [as] a natural process of knowledge that gradually uncovered problems and dealt with them', but rather 'as a historical construct that provides a space in which poor countries are known, specified, and intervened upon'. Thus, development discourse constitutes the problems (such as poverty) that it purports to analyse and solve."

In the post-development discourse, poverty alleviation can thus be based not on a project of modernisation, be it in its liberal/mainstream or radical/socialist guise. What is required is "(to) transcend development's dependence on Western modernity" (Escobar 1992, p. 21) and to have "a more radical collective imagining of alternative futures" (p. 22). In this "collective imagining" of alternatives to the dominant western discourses, grassroots social mobilisation becomes central (and with this 'empowerment' as well). Indeed, social mobilisation becomes the backbone of post-development:

"To think about 'alternatives to development' (...) requires a theoretico-practical transformation of the notions of development, modernity and the economy. This transformation

can be best achieved by building upon the practices of social movements, especially those in the Third World that have emerged in response to post-World War II hegemonic social orders. These movements are essential for the creation of alternative visions of democracy, economy and society" (Escobar 1992, p. 22). And: "The possibility for redefining development (...) rests largely with the action of social movements" (p. 47).

Escobar (1992) insists that "theoretically informed alternatives should be practice-oriented" (p. 28), i.e. emerge from everyday life as experienced in social movements. These are the sites for the construction of identities, new discourses and new ideas of democracy:

"Reflection on daily life has to be located at the intersection of meaning production, on the one hand, and macro-processes of domination, on the other. Inquiry into social movements from this perspective seeks to restore the centrality of popular practices, without reducing the movements to something else: the logic of domination or capital accumulation, the struggle of the working class or the labour of parties. Thus oriented, such an inquiry vindicates the value of the practices of the majority in producing the world in which we live; for it is true that the majority have to live within structures of domination that are not of their own making, it is also true that, in relation to those structures and strategies, they effect a veritable process of creation, by adapting, resisting, transforming or subverting those forms through manifold tactics (...)" (Escobar 1992, p. 30).

"The challenge for social movements – and the experts who work with them – is to come up with new ways of talking about needs and of demanding their satisfaction in ways that bypass the rationality of development with its 'basic needs' discourse" (Escobar 1992, p. 46).

Indeed, post-development has deep "faith in the endogenous" and in "local and grassroots autonomy" (Pieterse 2009, p. 341). Unlike in both the mainstream/residual and the relational/radical

perspective, traditional forms of social relations are less seen as causing poverty and exploitation, but are rather seen as its potentials.

### 1.3 Overlaps and contestations

As already stated, the above overview on grand narratives risks simplification. Still, it helps to step back for a moment from the everyday complexities of development debates, and to briefly reflect on their underpinnings and foundational assumptions. To recall one example – they all talk of empowerment in an instrumental sense, but this notion is embedded in very different framings of causes of poverty and inequality, and of different imaginations on how to overcome it. The overview also allows searching for potential similarities. What unites them is a concern for poverty and inequality. They all accept that too many people are not in a position to live decent lives, and they are all driven by the search for better living conditions. None accepts the status quo or argues for *laissez-faire*. Even post-developmentalists do not share positions that romanticize ways of living in the Global South as socially and culturally harmonious and ecologically sensitive and balanced. In addition, all the three discourses are not limited to a socio-political or economic niche within overall societal life – they all engage with the social as such, that is how individuals and groups are (and should be) interacting, building relations, and are structuring economic, political and cultural processes. All the three discourses have the will to change the ways how people live – 'development' indeed affects all.

But we also find fault lines that have the potential to trigger contestations. The overview highlighted the fundamental differences in the discursive framing of the underlying causes for poverty and inequality – non-innovative and persisting 'cultures' of subsistence versus exploitative social relations versus the production of underdevelopment through western paradigms of capitalism and socialism. It highlighted the differences regarding the 'so-what' – market integration versus liberating the exploited

versus 'indigenous' creativity. It also highlighted the different roles ascribed to the state – neutral change agent and setter of market-friendly conditions versus authority to regulate social relations versus no role at all (here, though, post-developmentalists remain rather vague). And last, but not least, it highlighted the role ascribed to the social mobilisation of 'people' – community-based organisations (and NGOs) to facilitate (and to some extent define) service delivery versus class-conscious mobilisation, and to struggle against exploitative social relations versus laboratories to imagine and practice alternative societies.

## **1.4 Contested developments - and beyond**

How, then, do these (potential) fault lines translate into (actual) contestations? What are the details of these contestations? And how do they affect people? In order to debate such questions a bit closer and more concretely, I now zoom into a few of these fault lines, that is, the role of the state, the role of peoples' mobilisation, and the notion of 'the poor'. There are, of course, many others that need adequate attention (such as the tension between prioritising market production versus social relations), but the first three can help to gain some insights.

**Role of the state:** All three discourses contain specific imaginations on the role of the state in the context of 'development'. In the mainstream, it is the role of the state to ensure that the structural transformation from subsistence to market integration takes place, and that, in consequence, the economies grow. The state has to ensure that those in poverty are benefitting sufficiently from the "expanding pie" (see the quote from the World Bank) but without constraining the room for manoeuvre of the key drivers of growth – entrepreneurs, investors, etc. In the residual/radical discourse, the state's role concentrates on this last point. The state "as an instrument of people's power, people's democracy and people's empowerment" (see the quote further above) enforces egalitarian social relations among the various (economic) sections of society. It controls those with disproportionate control over means of

production (land is a case in point, but also agricultural labour or control over financial capital required to stimulate production, or in general, a surplus. In the post-development perspective, the state's role is less clear. The state in the Global South is generally held as being the outcome of western development engineering and criticised for it. So, there is a need to rethink the state; though it may not go much beyond.

We can thus identify a central fault line along the imagination of the state and its role in the socio-economic nexus: While, according to one view, the state needs to ensure that structural transformation does not hurt those that make the pie grow in the first place, the other view exactly targets these actors – large farmers / landlords, entrepreneurs involved in production along forward and backward linkages, and traders/merchants that link production with consumption, and accuses them of exploitation. Indeed, in many countries these two seemingly contradictory visions – embedded in grand narratives of 'development' – are contested. They tell us about national economic policies, for example, of changing governments in power over time. But they can also lead to violent confrontation in cases where those in power are not willing to listen to 'the others'. The subsequent chapters in this edited book will for sure unravel some of the causes of the civil war in Nepal as linked to this fault line.

Still, in many instances, contestations appear to be triggered less by the more abstract level of general development discourses. For example, the radical/socialist state may have had clearer contours before the late 1980s, prior to the collapse of real socialism. However today, this is less clear; Borrás and Saturno (2009, p. 5) quote Bernstein to lament "the demise (...) of any plausible socialist model of development". Similarly in the case of mainstream: Though the state has been condemned for some time and thus 'right-sized' (see the infamous Structural Adjustment Programs), recent years have seen its rehabilitation even among neo-liberal discourses. Borrás and Saturno (2009, p. 10) argue that contemporary crises such as food, energy and finance are "(...) likely to re-emphasise, not devalue, the role played by nation-states and state authorities



in the politics of agrarian transformation.” Even the World Bank argues:

“The emphasis on 'getting prices right' and improving the macroeconomic environment had important positive effects for agriculture, such as reducing its tax burden (...). But it left many market failures unresolved, creating second-generation problems (...), especially where a weak private sector could not fill the gap. (...). There is now general agreement that the state must invest in core public goods, such as agricultural R&D, rural roads, property rights, and the enforcement of rules and contracts (...). Beyond providing these core public goods, the state has to facilitate, coordinate, and regulate, although the degree of state activism in these roles is debated. The agriculture-for-development agenda also assigns a strong role to public policy to promote poverty reduction and equity, including gender equity, by building productive assets and providing safety nets” (WB 2008, p. 247; emphasis mine).

These observations suggest that the importance *per se* of 'the state' for, and within, processes of development – and especially regarding the problems faced by 'the poor' (I will come to that notion further below) – appears to be appreciated across otherwise conflicting discourses. The state is important for both relational and residual views, and thus contestations rooted in ideologies (at least to some extent) fade away. But what we observe is that the *practical* notion of 'the state' is being interrogated. By this I refer to concrete questions of who 'the state' is, how it assumes its role in representing developmental needs of a nation (and the heterogeneous social entities making up a nation), and what practical mechanisms and capacities it takes to address its tasks. After all, ideologies themselves cannot be a guarantee for a state to function.

For a long time, and across competing discourses, 'the state' was imagined as a separate entity above society at large, as a neutral agent concerned with the welfare of its citizens, and staffed by 'public servants' that strictly followed their duties (that is, the

development discourses of those controlling the state). This idealistic and functionalist image is still present in many contemporary development interventions, but it is increasingly questioned. Even the World Bank realises that the poor "face specific governance problems in rural areas, such as deeply entrenched political and social structures, that are often linked to unequal access to land, which perpetuates severe inequalities and can lead to violent local conflicts" (WB 2008, p. 245). With this, questions of representation and control over 'the state' (whether this state is inclined towards a more mainstream or a more relational understanding of development) comes central stage in a much more pronounced way. Following this argument, it does not surprise that 'decentralisation' is not only a concern of the 'neo-liberals', but of a progressive left as well (Geiser and Rist 2009). This is best illustrated in the case of the Indian state of Kerala (e.g. Thomas Isaac 2000). And the debate is not whether or no decentralisation is required to address poverty issues, but how (e.g. Thomas Isaac 2003).

Closely linked to it are questions of capacity. Expectations from the state are high across competing discourses, but who are the people within the state that have to live up to these expectations at the end of the day? State officials, after all, are no longer understood in the Weberian sense as bureaucrats beyond society (Weber 2006). Today, they too are seen as members of a larger society, struggling to secure their livelihoods and trying to make their ends meet – easier for the ones higher in the state hierarchy, and more difficult for those lower down (in the "trenches"; Corbridge 2008). For development, those lower down count most.

I thus argue that the contestation around the role of the state in development continues. But it seems to shift from the more general debate on the role of 'the state' in development (neo-liberal versus 'socialist') to questions of the construction of the state, its representativeness vis-à-vis a nation's social realities, and specifically, its capacities to practice in the everyday life. More prosaically, the challenges shift from the grand debates to the nitty-gritties of 'Public Sector Reform' or the struggles for operational

and accountable structures of decentralisation. And it is here that *new* fields of contestation emerge.

**The role of social mobilisation:** All three discourses contain specific imaginations on the role of social mobilisation. In the mainstream, social mobilisation is essential to spread the opportunities of market relations; it helps those entrusted with development to better deliver their services to the poor. Poorer social groups can benefit from 'collective action' not only to share their experiences, but to access their required means to enter market relations. In the radicals' reading, socially mobilising the exploited people around their class interests is a prerequisite to overcome exploitative social relations and to establish an egalitarian society in which the benefits of labour are equally shared by all. And for post-developmentalists, it is the people at the grassroots themselves who (have to) mobilise collectively, and imagine and define their ways out of poverty and inequality. They also have to define by themselves what their needs are and how these needs are to be fulfilled. Indeed, these different conceptions clash at times. The World Bank (2008) states that local social mobilisation can risk counter-trends:

"Better organized agricultural interest groups may demand inefficient policy instruments, such as price support" (WB 2008, p. 246) – and there is a need "to avoid creating political pressure for 'misinvestment' or to resist reforms" (p. 249).

It is obvious that this warning is targeted, at least partly, at groups that demand redistribution. But it is especially representatives of the relational/radical discourse that criticises the mainstream's forms of local mobilisation. To give just two examples:

"The NGO-ization of politics threatens to turn resistance into a well-mannered, reasonable, salaried, 9-to-5 job. With a few perks thrown in. Real resistance has real consequences. And no salary" (Roy 2004).

"A section of NGOs and social movements tend to negate this role of the State with an anti-statist outlook. The World Bank and big corporate foundations promote development in the

developing countries with a philosophy of cutting off the State from its developmental and welfare responsibilities. (...) Foreign-funded NGOs in the development-empowerment business are in fact facilitators of the neo-liberal reforms and the imperialist strategy" (Karat 2004).

Thus, there are claims and counterclaims regarding local mobilisation, its legitimacy and its purpose. It is indeed in this sphere that we observe an increasing array of struggles among and between local organisations and their respective claims.

Still, these contestations seem to go beyond ideological spheres, and they seem, at closer observation, to involve much more specific aspects of mobilisation practices. Both mainstream and radical discourses foresee local mobilisation to happen around economic issues – and this requires specialised knowledge and skills. Both have to deal with 'nitty-gritties', such as avoiding elite-capture, convincing rural people to trust the respective activists, to invest time into mobilisation, and so on. And both discourses are challenged, in actual practice, by the fact that mobilisation often follows a different rationale. It crystallises around religion, caste, region, or ethnic affiliation, and less around directly economic and 'material' concerns. 'Non-material' issues of recognition and the strengthening of identity are put central stage by the leaders of such mobilisations (how far they are inspired by 'post-developmentalism' needs to be studied). In other words, ideological contestations may continue to influence the sphere of local social mobilisation. But there are challenges across for justifying that one's mobilisation is truly representative of people's aspirations; of proving that especially 'the poors' livelihoods improve; of finding the ways and means of how to support the poors' livelihoods; of finding ways to support the livelihoods of those activists who practice mobilisation. After all, they too would need some income, although a few might be able to live with "(...) no salary" (see Roy 2004 above).

Thus, I argue that in some instances, the old fault lines along the main discourses continue to fuel contestations. But these are

increasingly replaced by challenges across the main discourses – challenges (and related struggles) over who represents the aspirations of the 'local people', who is to represent them vis-à-vis 'the state', with whom is the state to interact in the venture for development, and how to finance the mobilisation activists?

**Who are the poor:** In all the three discourses, unequal opportunities to live a decent life are the core concern, relating to the fate of 'the poor'. However, they seem to differ very little in the conceptualisation of 'the poor'. They all tend to homogenise them by putting them into general categories, such as 'small farmers', 'peasants', or the 'rural' poor. The Swiss Development Cooperation (SDC) for example echoes the mainstream's position:

"At present, more than a billion people around the world are under-nourished. More than three-quarters of them depend on rural livelihoods and are extremely poor farmers. Most of them are under-equipped, live in unfavourable areas, have little or no land, are underemployed and poorly paid agricultural labourers" (SDC no date).

The radical/relational perspective too characterises the poor in a rather homogenising way. Most debates take place around 'agrarian issues', thus a focus on agriculture. Small or marginal farmers and agricultural labourers are at times characterised to have the same mutual interests, since both are exploited by richer segments of society. In the post-development perspective, there is a focus on "peasantness", claiming for it "the distinctiveness of peasant production as a way of life, by emphasizing the importance of self-consumption, unpaid family labour, non-capitalist relations and communitarian outlook" (Vergara-Camus 2013). In order to differentiate its take from other discourses, the notion of the 'agrarians' is proposed to describe the disadvantaged (McMichael 2006).

Thus, there is quite surprisingly no real fault line here. But contradictory debates surface when we take a closer look at ground realities. Increasingly, 'the poor' are perceived beyond the poverty line paradigm as well as the closed compartment of 'class'

– as those being embedded in specific and complex rural social and political contexts. As Borras and Saturno (2009, p. 19) argue, the “messy complex reality of the agrarian world” produces an enormous heterogeneity of the ‘poor’. This fact has specifically been highlighted by the recent analytical emphasis on livelihoods, and across the theoretical underpinnings of involved researchers. The World Bank for example mentions that creating “political coalitions that support the rights of agricultural labourers is a challenge” (WB 2008, p. 249), that “(...) projects need special provisions to avoid elite capture” (p. 256), and that “(...) collective action can also fail by excluding disadvantaged groups, with the benefits captured only by local elites” (p. 248). The Swiss Development Cooperation expresses similar concerns in its program:

*“Addressing political aspects of poverty:* informing disadvantaged people of their rights and providing access to legal support; facilitating collective action; and building public speaking and negotiation capacities. *Addressing socio-cultural aspects of poverty* (...) facilitating the full and equal representation of different groups of people in community decision-making processes; working with both men and women to combat gender-based violence and mutilation; and supporting discriminated groups and individuals to claim their human rights. (...)”

And even more drastically, the dominant linking of the 'poor' to 'the rural' is increasingly questioned – with all its consequences on the received wisdom of poverty alleviation. The agrarian bias in all the three dominant discourses is placed under scrutiny. Though formulated rather provocatively, Rigg (2006, p. 195) argues that actual dynamics on the ground

“(...) fundamentally changed patterns and associations regarding wealth and poverty that we have become accustomed to, and comfortable with. No longer are the land rich necessarily also the prosperous in rural areas. No longer can we assume that small farmers are better off than landless labourers (...). No longer can we state, with surety, that tenants are in a better position than owner occupiers (...). No longer are agriculture

---

and farming the desired, default position of rural households. No longer do parents desire a settled, farming life for their children. And no longer should we assume that agricultural development is the best way to promote rural development, and rural development the best means of raising rural incomes and improving livelihoods (...)"

As already indicated, this is a provocative statement. But it inspires us to question assumed discourses and their underpinnings, specifically regarding the framing of poverty, the 'poor' and the needs of the 'poor'. In other words, the previously obvious category of 'the poor' – and with it its opposite (the rich, the upper class) – might become fuzzy and blurred. This is not provided for in the main discourses. And I argue that it is here where new contestations emerge on how to conceptualise complex realities with their interdependencies, and on how to intervene.

## **1.5 Concluding remarks**

This paper argues that 'development' is not a venture limited to a certain niche within given social, economic or political processes, but influences, directly or indirectly, the lives of most people, and specifically so in the countries of the South. 'Development' imagines and proposes changes in social realities, and enrolls thoughts and actions across the society. These imaginations take the form of competing discourses, and three such discourses (perceived as being the most influential ones) were discussed in the previous sections. The present discussion has highlighted the respective understandings of socio-economic-political realities that influence the ways in which 'development' is framed within such discourses. It helps to identify some of the fault lines along which contestations among the different imaginations of development can lead to more conflict and contestation. In order to better understand these contestations, I took three examples (the role of the state, the role of social mobilisation, and the conceptualisation of the poor). This has helped to show that in some instances these fault lines – informed by grand discourses of societal change – have caused

conflict and even violence. However, in many instances, the three general discourses have been overtaken by the complexities of ground realities and actual societal practices. These complexities, I argue, start to challenge the thinking and imagination across established ideologies, and open up the need for new debates. This does not mean that grand development discourses lost their relevance; many finance ministries, planning commissions or donor headquarters still frame their policies couched in these languages. But the challenges at the grassroots are much more complex, and call for critical and innovative thinking, going beyond established lines of problem (and solution) framing. This, though, could trigger new contestations. But these new fault lines are informed by a much more accurate and in-depth understanding of the “messy complex reality of the agrarian world” (see the quote above). Assumed realities can no longer be “shoehorned into pre-fabricated compartments” (Spencer 2007, p. 145) – that is the compartmentalised thinking of the grand development discourses.

## References

- Bebbington A.** 2007. Social Movements and the Politicization of Chronic Poverty. *Development and Change*, 38(5), 793–818.
- Bernstein H.** 1992. Poverty and the poor. In: Bernstein H, Crow B, Johnson H, editors. *Rural Livelihoods: Crises and Responses*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, The Open University, pp. 13–26.
- Borras Jr, Saturnino M.** 2009. Agrarian change and peasant studies: changes, continuities and challenges - an introduction. *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 36 (1), 5-31.
- Cooke B, Kothari U, editors.** 2001. Participation: The new tyranny? London: Zed Books.
- Corbridge S.** 2008. State and Society. In: Cox KR, Low M, Robinson J, editors. *The SAGE Handbook of Political Geography*. London, UK: SAGE Publications.
- Escobar A.** 1992. Imagining a Post-Development Era? Critical Thought, Development and Social Movements. *Social Text*, No. 31/32, pp. 20-56.
- Esteva G.** 1987. Regenerating peoples' spaces. *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, 12 (1), 125-152.



- Geiser U, Rist S, editors.** 2009. *Decentralisation Meets Local Complexity: Local Struggles, State Decentralisation and Access to Natural Resources in South Asia and Latin America. Perspectives of the Swiss National Centre of Competence in Research (NCCR) North-South, University of Bern*, Vol. 4. Bern: Geographica Bernensia.
- Ghimire S.** 2009. Macro development and micro social processes: Development as discourse in Nepal. *Occasional Papers in Sociology and Anthropology*, Vol.11, 221-243.
- Glassman J.** 2006. Primitive accumulation, accumulation by dispossession, accumulation by 'extra-economic' means. *Progress in Human Geography*, 30 (5), 608–625.
- Herring RJ, Agarwala R.** 2006. Introduction – Restoring Agency to Class: Puzzles from the Subcontinent. *Critical Asian Studies*, 38 (4), 323-356.
- IFPRI [International Food Policy Research Institute].** 2013. *From Subsistence to Profit – Transforming Smallholder Farms*. Written by Shenggen Fan, Joanna Brzeska, Michiel Keyzer, and Alex Halsema. Washington, DC: International Food Policy Research Institute.
- Johnston BF, Kilby P.** 1982. Unimodal and bimodal strategies of agrarian change. In: Harriss J, editor. *Rural development: theories of peasant economy and agrarian change*. London: Hutchinson Publishing Group.
- Karat P.** 2004. *Political Parties & Social Movements*. Retrieved on August 2013 from <http://www.cvim.org/content/political-parties-social-movements>
- Manandhar P.** 2011. *Contested Rural Development in Nepal*. NCCR North-South Dialogue 32 (Working Paper, Research Project 1 - Contested Rural Development). Bern and Zurich, Switzerland: NCCR North-South.
- McMichael P.** 2006. Reframing Development: Global Peasant Movements and the New Agrarian Question. *Canadian Journal of Development Studies/Revue canadienne d'études du développement*, 27:4, 471-483.
- McNamara RS.** 1973. Address to the board of governors of the World Bank, Nairobi, Kenya, September 24, 1973. In: The World Bank, editor 1981. *The McNamara years at the World Bank*. John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore.
- Outhwaite W, Bottomore T, editors.** 1993. *The Blackwell dictionary of twentieth-century social thought*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers Ltd.
- Parfitt T.** 2012. *A Post-Structuralist Agenda for Development*. Retrieved on November 2013 from <http://www.e-ir.info/2012/04/10/a-post-structuralist-agenda-for-development/>
- Pieterse JN.** 2009. Post-development. In: Kitchin R, Thrift N, editors. *International Encyclopaedia of Human Geography*. Amsterdam: Elsevier.

- Roy A.** September 3, 2004. *Public power in the age of empire*. Retrieved on March 2014 from <http://socialistworker.org>
- Ramakumar R.** 2013. Mixed metaphors. *Frontline*, August, 2013.
- SDC [Swiss Development Cooperation]**. n.d. *Supporting the poor where they live and work – in rural areas*. Accessed on November 2013 from [http://www.deza.admin.ch/en/Home/Themes/Agriculture\\_and\\_food\\_security/Rural\\_areas](http://www.deza.admin.ch/en/Home/Themes/Agriculture_and_food_security/Rural_areas)
- Spencer J.** 2007. *Anthropology, politics and the state – democracy and violence in South Asia*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Tariq F.** 2010. South Asia: A regional 'new politics' needed to challenge neoliberal agenda. The role of market and state in poverty reduction and improving distributive justice. A paper presented in Conference jointly organised by the Council of Social Democrats in Sri Lanka and the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, October 2-3, 2010.
- Thomas Isaac T. M.** 2000. *Local Democracy and Development: People's campaign for decentralised planning in Kerala*. New Delhi: Left Word Books.
- Thomas Isaac T. M.** 2003. People's Plan is different from World Bank programme. *Frontline*, 20(16), August 02-15, 2003.
- Vergara-Camus L.** 2013. Rural Social Movements in Latin America: In the Eye of the Storm. *Journal of Agrarian Change*, 13, 4: 590–606
- Weber M.** 2006. Bureaucracy. In: Sharma A, Gupta A, editors. *The anthropology of the state – a reader*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing.
- WB [World Bank]**. 1975. *Rural Development. Sector Strategy Paper*. Washington DC: The WB.
- WB [World Bank]**. 2008. *World Development Report 2008 – Agriculture for Development*. Washington DC: The WB.
- WB [World Bank]**. 2013a. *Nepal Development Update. Poverty Reduction and Economic Management South Asia Region*. Kathmandu, Nepal: The WB.
- WB [World Bank]**. 2013b. *The World Bank Group Goals – End extreme poverty and promote shared prosperity*. Washington DC: The WB.

\* \* \* \* \*

# CONTESTED

## DEVELOPMENT IN NEPAL:

Experiences and Reflections



**Edited by**

Sagar Raj Sharma

Bishnu Raj Upreti

Prabin Manandhar

Mahendra Sapkota

# **Contested Development in Nepal: Experiences and Reflections**

## **Edited by**

Sagar Raj Sharma  
Bishnu Raj Upreti  
Prabin Manandhar  
Mahendra Sapkota

## **Published by**

School of Arts, Department of Development Studies,  
Kathmandu University  
and  
Nepal Centre for Contemporary Research (NCCR)

**Citation:**

**Sharma SR, Upreti BR, Manandhar P, Sapkota M, editors. 2014.** *Contested Development in Nepal: Experiences and Reflections.* Kathmandu: School of Arts, Kathmandu University and Nepal Centre for Contemporary Research.

**Copyright** © 2014 School of Arts, Kathmandu University and Nepal Centre for Contemporary Research.

All rights reserved.

**ISBN:** 978-9937-8883-0-1

**Price:** 300 NRs (paper back)  
350 NRs (hard cover)

**Printed by:**

Heidel Press Pvt. Ltd. Dillibazar, Kathmandu

**Cover concept:** Sagar Raj Sharma and Mahendra Sapkota

**Cover design:** Kirtiman Shakya

**Layout design:** Jyoti Khatiwada

**Disclaimer:** The content and materials presented in this book are of the respective authors and do not necessarily reflect the views and opinions of the Nepal Centre for Contemporary Research or the School of Arts, Kathmandu University. These organisations, therefore, will not assume any responsibility regarding the complexities in the contents and materials of this book.